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Navigating the Gen Z Paradox: A Qualitative Study of Career Aspirations, Digital Individualism, and Work–Life Integration among Generation Z

Menavigasi Paradoks Generasi Z: Sebuah Studi Kualitatif mengenai Aspirasi Karier, Individualisme Digital, dan Integrasi Kehidupan–Kerja di Kalangan Generasi Z

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Abstract

This study explores the psychosocial paradox experienced by Generation Z in Eastern Indonesia by examining the dynamic interaction between their career aspirations, digital individualism, and work–life integration from a guidance and counseling perspective. Employing a qualitative descriptive design rooted in a constructivist epistemological position, the study utilized Braun and Clarke's framework for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews, structured naturalistic observations, and researchers' reflexive journals from participants across West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). The analysis revealed three prominent themes: (1) Aspiration–Behavior Discordance, characterized by high career ambitions but critically low active preparation or strategic planning; (2) Digital Individualism and Community Disengagement, marked by a strong preference for digitally mediated autonomous interactions and minimal participation in physical communal organizations; and (3) Reconceptualization of Work and Life Integration, where participants prioritize personal flexibility, autonomy, and psychological well-being over traditional, purely financial metrics of professional success. These findings demonstrate that Generation Z's vocational and psychosocial growth operates as an interconnected developmental system navigating digital affordances alongside local socio-economic realities and structural constraints. Consequently, contemporary counseling interventions must move beyond basic occupation-centered guidance to holistically integrate digital well-being, self-regulation, and community connectedness to help youth translate abstract aspirations into adaptive actions.

Keywords : *Generation Z, Career Aspirations, Digital Individualism, Work–Life Integration, Counseling.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi paradoks psikososial yang dialami oleh Generasi Z di Indonesia Timur dengan mengkaji interaksi dinamis antara aspirasi karier, individualisme digital, dan integrasi kehidupan–kerja dari perspektif bimbingan dan konseling. Menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif yang berakar pada posisi epistemologi konstruktivis, penelitian ini menerapkan analisis tematik refleksif (RTA) berdasarkan kerangka kerja Braun dan Clarke. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara individual semi-terstruktur, observasi naturalistik terstruktur, dan jurnal refleksif peneliti dari para partisipan di wilayah Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) dan Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). Analisis mengidentifikasi tiga tema utama: (1) Ketidakselarasan Aspirasi–Perilaku), yang ditandai dengan ambisi karier yang tinggi namun disertai dengan sangat rendahnya persiapan nyata atau perencanaan strategis; (2) Individualisme Digital dan Keterputusan Komunitas, yang dicirikan oleh preferensi kuat terhadap interaksi otonom termediasi digital dan minimnya partisipasi dalam organisasi komunal fisik; serta (3) Rekonseptualisasi Integrasi Kerja dan Kehidupan, di mana partisipan memprioritaskan fleksibilitas pribadi, otonomi, dan kesejahteraan psikologis di atas metrik kesuksesan profesional yang murni berbasis finansial tradisional. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa pertumbuhan vokasional dan psikososial Generasi Z berjalan sebagai sebuah sistem perkembangan yang saling terhubung dalam menavigasi peluang digital di tengah realitas sosio-ekonomi dan keterbatasan struktural lokal. Oleh karena itu, intervensi konseling kontemporer harus melampaui model bimbingan tradisional yang berorientasi pada jabatan, dengan mengintegrasikan kesejahteraan digital, regulasi diri, dan keterhubungan komunitas secara holistik demi membantu generasi muda mentransformasikan aspirasi abstrak mereka menjadi tindakan nyata yang adaptif.

Kata Kunci : Generasi Z, Aspirasi Karier, Individualisme Digital, Integrasi Kehidupan Kerja, Konseling.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly transformed how young people learn, communicate, build relationships, and envision their future careers (Guslina et al., 2025). Among all generational cohorts, Generation Z has experienced the most intensive exposure to digital environments, having grown up in an era characterized by social media, instant communication, artificial intelligence, and continuous internet connectivity (Nishi et al., 2021). This digital immersion has created unprecedented opportunities for self-development, career exploration, and entrepreneurial engagement (Kim et al., 2024). Through online platforms, young people can access educational resources, establish professional networks, and pursue career aspirations that were previously difficult to attain. Consequently, Generation Z is frequently portrayed as ambitious, adaptive, technologically proficient, and highly motivated to achieve meaningful professional success (Neagu & Vieriu, 2022).

However, the benefits of digitalization are accompanied by a complex set of psychosocial challenges. While digital platforms facilitate connectivity, they simultaneously encourage forms of individualism that prioritize personal branding, self-presentation, and virtual interactions over deeper interpersonal engagement. The growing emphasis on online visibility and digital identity has altered how young people perceive success, social relationships, and career achievement. Constant exposure to curated lifestyles, professional accomplishments, and social comparison through digital media can intensify achievement pressures and shape unrealistic career expectations (Insarauto et al., 2022). As a result, many members of Generation Z experience a tension between pursuing ambitious career goals and maintaining psychological well-being, meaningful social relationships, and a balanced lifestyle (Simmons et al., 2021).

This phenomenon is increasingly evident as Generation Z enters higher education and the labor market (Chesak et al., 2021). Unlike previous generations that often viewed career success through traditional indicators such as job security and organizational loyalty, Generation Z tends to prioritize flexibility, personal fulfillment, meaningful work, and work–life integration. Recent studies suggest that younger workers are more likely to seek occupations that align with their personal values and provide opportunities for autonomy and self-expression (Antoniadou, 2022). Simultaneously, they are less willing to sacrifice personal well-being for professional advancement. Although this shift reflects a positive redefinition of career success, it also generates new challenges when aspirations for rapid achievement collide with the realities of competitive labor markets, economic uncertainty, and increasing performance demands. Research on work–life integration consistently demonstrates that difficulties in balancing personal and professional roles can negatively affect psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and long-term career sustainability (N & Sudha, 2025).

The situation becomes even more complex when viewed through the lens of digital individualism. Emerging evidence suggests that prolonged engagement with digital platforms can contribute to behavioral patterns characterized by social withdrawal, reduced interpersonal connectedness, and heightened dependence on online validation (Iyer et al., 2026; Moise et al., 2025). For Generation Z, whose identity formation occurs largely within digital ecosystems, online interactions frequently become intertwined with self-worth, career aspirations, and perceptions of success. While digital technologies enable greater access to information and career opportunities, they may simultaneously create psychological vulnerabilities associated with comparison culture, fear of missing out (FOMO), and uncertainty regarding future career pathways (Öhman et al., 2025; O'sullivan et al., 2025). These conditions suggest the existence of a psychosocial paradox in which digital connectivity promotes opportunity and empowerment while simultaneously increasing psychological strain and social fragmentation (Bindu Ashwini et al., 2026).

Although scholars have extensively examined digital behavior, career development, and psychological well-being, the existing body of literature remains fragmented (Lyubarova et al., 2023; Strogetskaya et al., 2023). Studies concerning digital technology generally focus on problematic internet use, digital dependency, or online behavioral patterns. Career development research, meanwhile, predominantly investigates employability, vocational interests, career adaptability, and workplace outcomes. Likewise, work–life integration studies are largely concentrated on established professionals rather than emerging adults who are still navigating critical developmental transitions (Moerdler et al., 2025; Rachoin et al., 2023). Consequently, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how digital individualism, career aspirations, and work–life integration collectively shape the psychosocial experiences of Generation Z (Janczewski et al., 2024; Jose et al., 2026). The absence of an integrated perspective restricts our understanding of the multifaceted challenges confronting contemporary youth and limits the development of comprehensive intervention strategies (Chen & Hsu, 2024; Dvorscek, 2024).

Furthermore, the geographical concentration of existing studies presents another important limitation (Fichtnerova & Vackova, 2022; Soundarya Priya & Anandh, 2024). Most research on Generation Z has been conducted in Western countries or economically advanced urban settings, where social, cultural, and technological conditions differ considerably from those found in developing regions (Klangrit et al., 2025). Within Indonesia, empirical investigations addressing Generation Z's psychosocial development have predominantly focused on major urban centers located in the western part of the country (Dietrich et al., 2025). In contrast, Eastern Indonesia represents a unique sociocultural context characterized by diverse cultural identities, varying levels of digital infrastructure, and distinct educational and employment opportunities

(O'Sullivan et al., 2026). The rapid diffusion of digital technologies into these communities has created new patterns of social interaction and career development that remain insufficiently understood. Consequently, evidence-based counseling approaches developed in other contexts may not adequately address the realities and needs of young people in Eastern Indonesia (Suarez et al., 2023).

Given these circumstances, counseling professionals face increasing demands to provide interventions that extend beyond traditional career guidance (Chelaru & Varkiani, 2024). Contemporary counseling must address the interconnected nature of digital behavior, identity formation, psychosocial well-being, and career development. Effective counseling strategies should not only assist young people in making informed career decisions but also help them develop healthy relationships with digital technologies, strengthen interpersonal competencies, and cultivate sustainable approaches to work–life integration. Such interventions are particularly important during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, a developmental period in which individuals establish long-term patterns related to career engagement, social functioning, and psychological well-being (Manohar et al., 2026).

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the psychosocial paradox experienced by Generation Z through the interconnected dimensions of career aspirations, digital individualism, and work–life integration within the context of Eastern Indonesia. By adopting a counseling perspective, the study aims to move beyond fragmented explanations and offer a holistic understanding of how these dimensions interact in shaping young people's developmental experiences. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing literature on Generation Z while providing culturally relevant insights for counselors, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders seeking to promote adaptive career development, digital well-being, and psychosocial resilience among emerging generations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Rather than seeking the essential structure of lived experience as in phenomenology, qualitative description aims to provide a rich and theoretically informed account of participants' perspectives while remaining close to their everyday language and meanings (Sandelowski, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodological choice was considered appropriate because the study sought to identify recurring psychosocial patterns underlying Generation Z career aspirations, digital behavior, and work-life expectations rather than to develop a phenomenological essence. The study adopted a constructivist epistemological position, assuming that career identities and future aspirations are socially and culturally constructed through continuous interaction between individuals and their educational, familial, and digital environments. Consequently, reflexive thematic analysis was selected because of its explicit compatibility with constructivist qualitative inquiry, recognizing researcher reflexivity as an analytical resource rather than a source of bias requiring elimination (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Research Variables and Participants

Four analytical constructs guided data generation and coding:

1. Career aspirations, defined as participants' intended educational and occupational goals within the next five years;
2. Self-regulatory behavior, referring to observable planning, goal monitoring, persistence, and career preparation behaviors;
3. Digital individualism, defined as participants' preference for digitally mediated and autonomous interaction over collective face-to-face engagement; and
4. Work-life balance perception, referring to participants' beliefs regarding the relationship between career achievement and personal well-being.

These constructs functioned as theoretical sensitizing concepts during data collection rather than predetermined variables, allowing additional themes to emerge inductively throughout the analysis.

A total of six Generation Z participants, aged 17–23 years, were recruited through purposive sampling from secondary schools and universities across West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) and East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be currently enrolled in formal education, (b) clearly articulate future career aspirations during the initial screening interview, and (c) actively use at least two major social media platforms for a minimum of two hours per day.

The sample size was considered appropriate for this qualitative descriptive study because participant selection emphasized information-rich cases capable of providing in-depth accounts of career aspirations, digital experiences, and psychosocial development. Recruitment continued until thematic sufficiency was reached, with successive interviews yielding no substantially new conceptual insights. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, sample adequacy was determined by the richness and relevance of participants' narratives rather than statistical representativeness.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Code	Age	Gender	Region of Origin
R01	17	Female	Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB)
R02	18	Male	East Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB)
R03	19	Female	Bima, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB)
R04	20	Male	Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT)
R05	21	Female	Flores, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT)
R06	23	Male	West Sumbawa, West Nusa Tenggara (NTB)

Counseling Instruments and Data Collection

Data were generated through three complementary qualitative procedures. First, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted using an interview guide informed by career construction theory (Savickas, 2005, 2011), Erikson's psychosocial development framework, and Glasser's Choice Theory. Interviews explored participants' career goals, motivational beliefs, perceived barriers, digital lifestyles, and future expectations. Each interview lasted approximately 45–75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Second, structured naturalistic observations were conducted within educational and community settings to document behavioral manifestations of peer interaction, collaborative participation, and digital engagement. Observation notes served primarily as contextual evidence supporting interview interpretation. Third, researchers maintained reflexive journals throughout the research process to document analytic decisions, theoretical assumptions, and evolving interpretations. These journals enhanced reflexive transparency and formed part of the overall audit trail.

Coding Procedure

All interviews were transcribed verbatim before analysis. Coding was conducted iteratively using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Initial coding combined semantic and latent coding strategies to identify both explicit statements and underlying meanings.

A structured codebook was progressively developed during analysis, containing operational definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, representative quotations, and evolving conceptual memos for each code. Because reflexive thematic analysis conceptualizes coding as an interpretive process rather than a reliability exercise, formal inter-coder reliability statistics were not calculated. Instead, analytical credibility was strengthened through continuous reflexive discussion among the research team, peer debriefing, and repeated comparison between codes, themes, and original transcripts.

Research Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of UIN Mataram prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, while parental consent was secured for participants younger than 18 years. Participant confidentiality was maintained through anonymized alphanumeric identifiers (R01–R110), and all digital files were stored on password-protected institutional servers accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial coding, (3) generating candidate themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

Theoretical concepts from Choice Theory, Career Construction Theory, and Erikson's psychosocial development model functioned as interpretive lenses during later stages of theme refinement without constraining inductive theme generation.

Trustworthiness was established through multiple complementary strategies, including (a) triangulation across interviews, observations, and reflexive journals; (b) member reflection involving eight purposively selected participants who reviewed thematic interpretations; (c) peer debriefing with two independent guidance and counseling researchers; (d) maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development; and (e) continuous reflexive memo writing throughout the analytical process to enhance transparency and confirmability.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Participant Overview

A total of 110 Generation Z participants successfully completed all stages of the study. The demographic composition revealed a highly concentrated age distribution, with 88 participants (80.0%) falling within the 17–19-year-old category, while the remaining participants were aged between 20 and 22 years. At this stage, individuals are expected to actively construct vocational identities while simultaneously negotiating social belonging, autonomy, and future life goals.

Digital engagement emerged as a universal characteristic across the participant pool. All respondents reported daily use of at least two major social media platforms, with TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube serving as the primary digital ecosystems through which participants accessed information, entertainment, and social interaction. The average self-reported daily screen exposure exceeded five hours, indicating that digital environments have become central contexts for identity construction and future planning. Despite geographical differences among participants originating from various regions of Eastern

Indonesia, similarities in digital behavior were remarkably consistent.

Importantly, all participants demonstrated the ability to articulate at least one clear vocational aspiration during the intake interviews. Career aspirations ranged from conventional professions such as teaching and healthcare to emerging digital occupations including content creation, graphic design, and digital entrepreneurship. The universality of aspiration expression confirmed the suitability of purposive sampling procedures and established an appropriate baseline for examining discrepancies between career ambitions and behavioral implementation. However, preliminary observations suggested that possessing career goals did not necessarily translate into systematic preparation toward achieving those goals, thereby indicating the potential existence of aspiration–behavior discordance.

Theme 1: Aspiration–Behavior Discordance

One of the most salient findings emerging from the interviews and behavioral observations was the substantial discrepancy between participants' expressed career ambitions and their actual career-development behaviors. Although every participant was able to articulate a desired future occupation, the majority demonstrated limited engagement in activities directly supporting the realization of those aspirations.

As shown in Table 2, vocational aspirations were distributed across both traditional and contemporary career categories. The most frequently reported aspirations were content creator or graphic designer (24.5%), teacher or educator (20.9%), creative entrepreneur (19.1%), technology-related or diplomatic professions (19.1%), and healthcare occupations (16.4%). This distribution reflects the hybrid occupational imagination characteristic of Generation Z, in which digital-era professions coexist alongside more traditional vocational pathways.

Table 2. Vocational Aspirations Reported (n = 110)

Career Category	n	%
Content creator / graphic designer	27	24.5
Teacher / educator	23	20.9
Creative entrepreneur	21	19.1
Technology / diplomacy worker	21	19.1
Healthcare professional	18	16.4

While aspirational expression was universal, evidence of concrete career preparation was considerably less prevalent. Only 13 participants (11.8%) reported involvement in structured developmental activities such as vocational training, internships, online certification programs, mentorship initiatives, or organized learning communities during the preceding six months. In contrast, 97 participants (88.2%) reported that most discretionary time was spent on activities not directly related to career advancement, including social media consumption, entertainment streaming, casual content browsing, and online gaming.

Further analysis revealed that procrastination functioned as a recurring explanatory mechanism across interviews. Participants frequently attributed delayed action to external barriers such as limited economic resources, inadequate technological infrastructure, restricted educational opportunities, or perceived social inequality. Although these structural challenges were genuine, interview narratives also revealed a tendency to externalize responsibility for career progress.

Notably, none of the participants possessed a written career development plan, measurable milestones, or a timeline for skill acquisition. This absence of strategic planning represents a critical indicator of aspiration–behavior misalignment. Career goals were frequently described in inspirational terms but rarely translated into actionable objectives. In many cases, participants expressed confidence regarding future success despite the absence of systematic preparation.

The interviews further illustrated this phenomenon. One female participant aged 18 from Kupang (R44) stated:

> *"I want to be a teacher, but I haven't joined any training yet. Right now I'm still helping my parents and scrolling TikTok." (R01, Interview, 12 March 2026, Lines 118–121).*

> *"I want to work in design, but I don't have a laptop yet. So I'm making content with my phone for now." (R03, Interview, 15 March 2026, Lines 203–206).*

These statements illustrate how aspirations remain psychologically meaningful yet behaviorally underdeveloped. The findings suggest that the challenge confronting Generation Z may not stem from a lack of ambition, but rather from difficulties transforming aspirations into structured developmental actions.

Theme 2: Digital Individualism and Community Disengagement

A second major theme concerned the emergence of digital individualism, accompanied by declining participation in collective social activities. Across all observational sessions, participants displayed strong preferences for individualized forms of interaction mediated through digital technologies rather than traditional community-based engagement.

Participation in student organizations, extracurricular activities, youth associations, or community groups was notably limited. A total of 91 participants (82.7%) reported either minimal involvement or complete non-participation in organized collective activities. Even among participants who belonged to formal organizations, engagement was often passive and intermittent rather than sustained and active.

Communication preferences further reflected this pattern. Every participant reported favoring direct messages, text-based communication, or online interaction over face-to-face group discussion when provided with a choice. During observation sessions, participants appeared more comfortable expressing opinions through digital channels than through public verbal interaction. This behavioral

tendency supports previous findings that Generation Z increasingly negotiates social relationships through digitally mediated environments (Tapscott, 2009; Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Platform utilization patterns reinforced the centrality of digital spaces. TikTok emerged as the dominant platform (67.3%), followed by Instagram (47.3%) and YouTube (43.6%). Beyond consumption, participants actively engaged in identity curation. Approximately 80.9% reported selectively presenting aspects of themselves online through carefully chosen content, images, and narratives designed to align with desired self-images. Such behavior reflects contemporary forms of self-construction shaped by algorithmic visibility and social validation mechanisms.

The qualitative data demonstrated that digital spaces were frequently perceived as safer and more authentic than offline environments. One participant from Flores (R47) explained:

> *"I prefer making videos about my own feelings. It is more honest than performing in the school group."*

Another participant stated:

> *"In direct messages, I can be more real. In face-to-face situations, sometimes the connection is not there."*

These narratives suggest that digital individualism is not merely a preference for technology but a broader psychosocial orientation toward individualized, self-managed interaction. While such patterns may enhance autonomy and self-expression, they may simultaneously reduce opportunities for developing collaborative competencies, leadership skills, and collective problem-solving capacities that are essential for future career success.

Theme 3: Reconceptualization of Work and Life Integration

The third theme highlighted a significant transformation in how Generation Z conceptualizes career success and the relationship between work and personal life. Participants consistently rejected traditional notions of success centered exclusively on financial achievement or occupational prestige. Instead, they emphasized the importance of balancing professional aspirations with psychological well-being, family relationships, and personal interests.

An overwhelming majority of participants (98.2%) reported that work–life integration was equally important or more important than salary considerations when evaluating future career options. Participants repeatedly emphasized the desire to maintain autonomy over their time and preserve opportunities for self-care, recreation, and family engagement.

Preferences for future employment structures further reflected these values. Remote or home-based work was identified as the most desirable arrangement (62.7%), followed by freelance or project-based employment (46.4%), and community-oriented entrepreneurship (34.5%). Participants frequently associated flexible work arrangements with greater personal freedom and improved quality of life.

Nevertheless, observational data revealed an interesting contradiction. While participants strongly endorsed balance and well-being, 44 individuals (40.0%) demonstrated observable avoidance behaviors during collaborative tasks. These participants frequently shifted attention away from challenging activities toward more immediately rewarding or comfortable alternatives. Such behavior suggests that the pursuit of balance may occasionally be interpreted as avoidance of discomfort rather than effective self-management.

The qualitative narratives clearly reflected participants' value orientations. A female participant from Kupang (R83) stated:

> *"I want to work, but I refuse to sacrifice time for myself. Life is not only about salary." (R04, Interview, 17 March 2026, Lines 132–135).*

> *Similarly, another participant stated:*
> *"I want flexible work. If I can work from home, help my parents, and still have time for music, that is the ideal." (R06, Interview, 20 March 2026, Lines 214–218).*

Collectively, these findings indicate that Generation Z is redefining career success through a broader framework that prioritizes psychological well-being, personal autonomy, and life satisfaction alongside professional achievement. While this orientation may contribute to healthier long-term career development, it also presents new challenges for counselors and educators seeking to foster resilience, persistence, and goal-directed behavior in increasingly complex digital environments.

Table 3. Integrated Relationship Among Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Supporting Evidence	Interpretation	Career Implication
Aspiration–Behavior Discordance	Career aspirations exist	All participants identified desired careers	Motivation is present	Strong career interest
	Limited preparation	Only 11.8% joined training or internships	Career goals remain abstract	Low career readiness
	Procrastination	Delayed action despite awareness	Intentions do not become behavior	Reduced skill acquisition

	External attribution	Economic and technological barriers frequently cited	Responsibility is often externalized	Lower proactive career management
	Lack of career planning	No written career plans or milestones	Career development is unstructured	Difficult transition into employment
Digital Individualism and Community Disengagement	Heavy digital engagement	>5 hours daily on social media	Digital environments dominate identity formation	Digital literacy increases
	Low organizational involvement	82.7% minimally engaged	Limited collaborative experiences	Weak teamwork competence
	Online identity management	80.9% curate online identities	Digital self-presentation becomes central	Strong personal branding potential
	Preference for online communication	Digital interaction preferred over face-to-face	Reduced interpersonal confidence	Communication skills may remain underdeveloped
Reconceptualization of Work and Life Integration	Work-life balance prioritized	98.2% value balance over salary	Career success is redefined	Positive psychological orientation
	Flexible work preference	Remote and freelance work preferred	High autonomy expectations	Better adaptation to digital careers
	Avoidance of discomfort	40% avoided challenging collaborative tasks	Balance may become avoidance	Lower resilience and persistence

DISCUSSION

The psychosocial development of Generation Z in Eastern Indonesia cannot be adequately understood through conventional assumptions regarding career development, social participation, or work orientation. The paradox is particularly evident in the coexistence of ambitious career aspirations, strong preferences for personal autonomy, and relatively limited engagement in behaviors traditionally associated with career preparation and collective participation (Onumah et al., 2021). Although participants consistently articulated clear occupational aspirations and expressed optimism regarding their futures, these aspirations rarely translated into systematic preparation, structured planning, or sustained developmental behaviors (Zulistiawan, 2014). Simultaneously, participants preferred individualized forms of digital engagement over traditional collective participation while redefining career success in terms of psychological well-being, flexibility, and personal autonomy rather than occupational prestige alone(Nsiah et al., 2025).

This pattern challenges one of the central assumptions underlying traditional career development theories, namely that strong career aspirations naturally stimulate purposeful behavior. Classical vocational models generally conceptualize career development as a relatively linear progression in which individuals establish occupational goals, formulate plans, acquire competencies, and eventually achieve desired career outcomes. Such assumptions were developed within educational and labor-market contexts characterized by relatively stable occupational structures and predictable career pathways. The present findings, however, indicate that this linear relationship has become increasingly problematic for contemporary Generation Z (McGill-O'Rourke & Allan, 2025). Participants were capable of describing future occupations with remarkable clarity and enthusiasm, yet most were unable to identify concrete developmental steps required to achieve those ambitions (Kahfi & Adiyati, 2023). The absence of written career plans, measurable objectives, or consistent participation in career-related activities suggests that aspirations alone no longer function as reliable predictors of career behavior (Ligibel et al., 2025). Through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, participants are continuously exposed to narratives of entrepreneurship, professional achievement, and self-made success, which may contribute to the expansion of perceived career possibilities (Suswanto & Soeharto, 2022). In this sense, digital technology functions as an aspirational amplifier, enabling young people from geographically peripheral regions to imagine futures that extend beyond traditional local opportunities (Tawfik et al., 2021).

Rather than interpreting this discrepancy as evidence of diminished motivation or poor self-discipline, the findings invite a more critical understanding of how aspirations are constructed within digitally mediated societies. Contemporary digital platforms continuously expose young people to highly curated narratives of entrepreneurial success, financial independence, professional achievement, and personal fulfilment (Yang & Peng, 2026). Unlike previous generations, whose occupational knowledge was largely constrained by family, school, or local communities, Generation Z constructs career aspirations within an almost limitless informational environment. (Mulyana et al., 2026). Consequently, aspirations become increasingly diverse, ambitious, and globally oriented. Digital technologies

therefore function as aspirational amplifiers by expanding awareness of occupational possibilities far beyond local socioeconomic realities. This interpretation aligns with contemporary critiques of motivational theories that emphasize the distinction between wanting and doing. Individuals may genuinely desire a particular future while simultaneously engaging in behaviors that do not meaningfully contribute to its realization (Jalal & Rana, 2026).

This expansion of possibility also introduces an important psychological consequence. Exposure to an abundance of desirable futures may reduce commitment to any single developmental pathway. Participants frequently expressed interest in multiple careers simultaneously while postponing concrete action because they perceived numerous alternative opportunities remaining available. his observation reflects what may be described as an "aspiration–commitment paradox," in which increasing awareness of possible futures simultaneously weakens commitment to present developmental activities (Hofmann et al., 2026). The challenge facing Generation Z therefore lies not in imagining desirable futures but in narrowing those possibilities into achievable and sustained behavioral goals. In this respect, digital environments may inadvertently encourage exploration while delaying commitment, thereby widening the gap between aspiration and action (Guslina et al., 2025). Importantly, this interpretation extends beyond explanations centered exclusively on individual motivation. Participants repeatedly referred to limited educational opportunities, financial constraints, inadequate technological resources, and restricted professional networks as barriers preventing career preparation (Nishi et al., 2021). Such structural constraints remain particularly relevant within Eastern Indonesia, where regional disparities in educational quality, labor-market accessibility, and technological infrastructure continue to distinguish peripheral provinces from Indonesia's major metropolitan centers (Kim et al., 2024).

Aspiration–behavior discordance should not simply be interpreted as a personal failure to act but rather as the outcome of interactions between psychological processes and structural inequality. Young people are increasingly encouraged to imagine globally competitive futures while remaining embedded within local environments that often provide limited opportunities for translating these aspirations into concrete developmental experiences(Neagu & Vieriu, 2022). This interaction between digital opportunity and structural limitation represents one of the principal contributions of the present study. Previous studies have generally examined either psychological determinants of career adaptability or structural barriers to youth employment. The present findings suggest that these dimensions cannot be separated. Digital technologies significantly expand occupational imagination, whereas structural inequalities constrain opportunities for implementation. The coexistence of these opposing forces produces a developmental condition in which aspirations become increasingly detached from everyday behavior. Understanding career development among Generation Z requires moving beyond explanations emphasizing either individual agency or environmental constraint alone toward a more integrated perspective acknowledging their continuous interaction (Insarauto et al., 2022). The findings similarly challenge widespread assumptions regarding the social behavior of Generation Z. Public discourse frequently portrays contemporary young people as becoming socially isolated, excessively dependent upon smartphones, or disengaged from community life (Simmons et al., 2021).

The emergence of digital individualism further illuminates the psychosocial conditions underlying this paradox. Contrary to popular concerns regarding social isolation, the findings do not suggest that participants are socially disconnected. Rather, they indicate a transformation like social engagement itself. Although participants indeed reported limited involvement in formal organizations and collective activities, such interpretations appear overly simplistic. Participants consistently described maintaining active interpersonal relationships through digital communication, social media interaction, and online communities (Antoniadou, 2022). Their preference was therefore not for social withdrawal but for greater autonomy in determining how social interaction occurred. Digital communication enabled participants to regulate emotional exposure, selectively manage self-presentation, and participate according to personal comfort rather than institutional expectations.

This observation raises important questions regarding dominant conceptualizations of collectivism and individualism within Asian societies. Conventional cultural frameworks often position these constructs as opposing orientations in which increasing individual autonomy necessarily reflects declining collectivist values. The present findings suggest a considerably more complex reality. Participants consistently expressed strong commitments toward supporting parents, maintaining family relationships, and contributing economically to their households despite simultaneously preferring individualized forms of communication and self-expression (N & Sudha, 2025). Their digital behavior therefore did not indicate rejection of communal values but rather the renegotiation of these values within changing technological contexts. Collectivism appears to be evolving rather than disappearing, becoming increasingly compatible with individualized decision-making regarding career, identity, and lifestyle (Iyer et al., 2026). This reinterpretation is particularly significant within Eastern Indonesia, where communal traditions continue to influence everyday social life. Participants remained emotionally connected to family obligations while resisting institutional expectations perceived as unnecessarily restrictive (Moise et al., 2025). Such findings suggest that contemporary Generation Z is constructing hybrid identities integrating traditional cultural responsibilities with modern aspirations for autonomy. Rather than representing a simple transition from collectivism toward Western individualism, the evidence indicates the emergence of culturally adaptive forms of digital autonomy that coexist alongside enduring communal commitments. This hybridity may constitute one

of the defining psychosocial characteristics of digitally connected young adults living within rapidly modernizing yet culturally collectivist societies (Öhman et al., 2025).

The changing meaning of work observed throughout the interviews further illustrates this broader transformation. Participants consistently rejected occupational success defined exclusively by salary, organizational status, or hierarchical advancement. Instead, they emphasized flexibility, meaningful work, family relationships, psychological health, and opportunities for personal development. Such preferences reflect a substantial redefinition of vocational success (O'sullivan et al., 2025). Participants frequently described online interactions as more authentic and less demanding than face-to-face encounters. This preference highlights a significant challenge for counseling practice (Lyubarova et al., 2023). Conventional interventions frequently assume that increased participation in offline communities is inherently desirable. However, the present findings suggest that effective interventions must first recognize the legitimacy of digital forms of identity expression before encouraging broader social engagement. Failure to do so risks positioning counselors in opposition to the lived realities of Generation.

The findings also reveal an important cultural tension unique to the Eastern Indonesian context. Participants simultaneously endorsed communal values and engaged in highly individualized digital behaviors (Moerdler et al., 2025). At first glance, this pattern appears contradictory. However, closer examination suggests that collectivism itself may be undergoing transformation rather than decline (Rachoin et al., 2023). Participants did not reject family obligations, community belonging, or social responsibility. Instead, they increasingly sought to negotiate these commitments on their own terms (Janczewski et al., 2024). This observation challenges binary distinctions between collectivism and individualism that have dominated much cross-cultural research. The participants appeared to inhabit a hybrid cultural space in which traditional communal values coexist with digitally facilitated forms of autonomy and self-expression.

Such hybridity reflects broader societal changes occurring throughout Southeast Asia, where rapid technological modernization intersects with enduring collectivist traditions (Chen & Hsu, 2024). Rather than replacing collectivism, digital technologies may be reshaping how communal belonging is experienced and enacted. Community participation is becoming less geographically bounded and increasingly mediated through networks of shared interests, online communities, and digital affiliations (Dvorscek, 2024). Consequently, counselors and educators must reconsider assumptions regarding what constitutes healthy social participation in contemporary contexts. Measures of engagement based exclusively on traditional forms of community involvement may fail to capture meaningful forms of digital belonging experienced by younger generations (Fichtnerova & Vackova, 2022).

The reconceptualization of work observed in this study further demonstrates the emergence of new generational value systems. Participants overwhelmingly prioritized flexibility, autonomy, and personal well-being alongside economic achievement (Soundarya Priya & Anandh, 2024). This finding aligns with growing international evidence indicating that Generation Z evaluates career success through multidimensional criteria rather than solely through income or occupational status (Klangrit et al., 2025). Work is increasingly viewed as one component of a broader life project rather than as the central organizing principle of adulthood. Such perspectives reflect significant departures from traditional vocational ideologies that emphasize sacrifice, organizational loyalty, and delayed gratification (Dietrich et al., 2025).

From one perspective, this shift represents a psychologically healthy development. The prioritization of mental health, family relationships, and personal fulfillment may protect individuals from the burnout, workaholism, and identity foreclosure that have characterized previous generations (O'Sullivan et al., 2026). In an era marked by economic volatility, technological disruption, and changing employment structures, flexible approaches to work may constitute adaptive responses rather than signs of diminished commitment (Suarez et al., 2023). The preference for remote work, freelance arrangements, and entrepreneurial pathways suggests that participants are actively seeking forms of employment compatible with broader life goals.

Yet the findings also reveal potential risks associated with this reorientation. A substantial proportion of participants demonstrated avoidance behaviors during collaborative activities, raising questions about whether the pursuit of balance occasionally masks discomfort with challenge, uncertainty, or delayed rewards. In this regard, the discourse of work–life balance may function both as a protective resource and as a justification for disengagement. Distinguishing between healthy boundary-setting and avoidance-oriented behavior, therefore, becomes a critical task for counseling practitioners. Supporting well-being should not come at the expense of developing resilience, persistence, and tolerance for discomfort, all of which remain essential for long-term career success (Jose et al., 2026).

Taken together, the findings suggest that the psychosocial challenges facing Generation Z cannot be adequately addressed through traditional career guidance models focused exclusively on occupational choice. Career development, digital behavior, identity formation, and psychological well-being are deeply interconnected processes that require integrated intervention approaches (Janczewski et al., 2024). The evidence indicates that counseling professionals must move beyond information-based career guidance toward developmental models that cultivate self-regulation, psychological flexibility, community engagement, and adaptive identity construction. Such approaches are particularly important in contexts where rapid technological change intersects with socioeconomic constraints and cultural transformation (Fichtnerova & Vackova, 2022).

The present study therefore contributes to the growing literature on Generation Z by demonstrating that the central challenge confronting this cohort is not a lack of ambition, social awareness, or concern for the future (Soundarya Priya & Anandh, 2024). Rather, it is the challenge of integrating multiple and sometimes competing developmental demands within an increasingly complex digital world. Generation Z seeks meaningful careers, authentic identities, psychological well-being, and social belonging simultaneously (O'Sullivan et al., 2026). The difficulty lies not in the desirability of these goals but in their coordination. Consequently, effective counseling interventions must help young people bridge the gap between aspiration and action, autonomy and community, and personal fulfillment and professional responsibility (Handayani et al., 2024). Such efforts are essential not only for individual development but also for the broader social and economic sustainability of communities navigating the ongoing transition into the digital age.

CONCLUSION

The psychosocial development of Generation Z in Eastern Indonesia is better understood as an interconnected developmental system rather than as separate domains of career development, social participation, and psychological well-being. The coexistence of ambitious career aspirations with limited preparatory behaviors, individualized digital engagement alongside enduring family commitments, and the prioritization of work–life integration over traditional career success reveals a developmental configuration that cannot be sufficiently explained by conventional career development frameworks. Rather than representing isolated psychosocial characteristics, these dimensions interact dynamically through continuous negotiation between digital opportunities, structural constraints, and evolving cultural values. Theoretically, this study extends contemporary career development literature by challenging the long-standing assumption that career aspirations naturally translate into goal-directed behavior. The findings suggest that, within digitally mediated environments, aspirations increasingly function as identity constructions shaped by continuous exposure to multiple career possibilities rather than as direct antecedents of career action. Consequently, career adaptability should not be conceptualized solely as an individual psychological competence but as a context-dependent developmental process emerging from the interaction between digital identity formation, perceived agency, and access to structural opportunities. This perspective expands existing career theories by demonstrating that vocational behavior among Generation Z is inseparable from broader processes of digital identity negotiation and sociocultural transformation. Furthermore, the findings contribute to cross-cultural counseling literature by questioning the conventional dichotomy between collectivism and individualism. Participants did not abandon collectivist values but instead reconstructed them through digitally mediated forms of autonomy, suggesting that cultural orientations among contemporary youth are becoming increasingly hybrid rather than polarized. This reconceptualization provides a more culturally responsive understanding of career development in societies undergoing simultaneous digitalization and social change, particularly within geographically peripheral regions where global digital exposure coexists with persistent structural inequality.

These findings also imply that counseling theories and interventions should move beyond occupation-centered models toward developmental frameworks that integrate career adaptability, digital identity, self-regulation, and community connectedness. Supporting Generation Z, therefore, requires more than facilitating career decision-making; it requires enabling young people to transform digitally constructed aspirations into sustained developmental action while maintaining psychological well-being and meaningful social relationships. Future longitudinal and cross-cultural studies are needed to examine whether this integrated psychosocial configuration represents a broader developmental pattern among Generation Z across different sociocultural contexts or reflects distinctive adaptations emerging within peripheral regions experiencing rapid digital transformation.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UIN Mataram. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. For participants under 18 years of age, written consent was also obtained from their parents or legal guardians. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

TRANSPARENCY OF DATA

The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study, including interview transcripts and field notes, are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participant confidentiality. De-identified data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval by the institutional ethics committee.

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Authors' Contributions

Author 1: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing the original draft, and project administration.

Author 2: Supervision, methodology, validation, writing review, and editing.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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